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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study was conducted in 1992 of high school students in an urban school district in the northeastern United States. The initial focus of the study was school and student culture, student expectations, curriculum, achievement, attendance, and dropout rates. However, the study progressed to focus on how students survive the violence in their schools and communities. Several high schools in the district were studied for 1 month through observation and interviews. During the second month of the study period, observations and indepth interviews were collected at just two high schools in the district. Data also were collected from school records and other public documents. The schools were of similar size with high-security environments, and the student populations were majority African-American. Thirteen teenagers at the two schools provided primary data for the study. In one of the schools, eight students were killed between May 1992 and January 1993. The students discussed how they cope in their violent surroundings, maintain their dedication to school and education, and their outlook for the future. The students also offer their reactions to the murder of a classmate. (Contains 45 references.) (JPT)

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EMERGING ISSUES OF VIOLENCE: IMPACT ON LEADING AND LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

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Guns, killings, sex, and drugs - - this is not what life is all about.

Quiet, reserved, a kind of terror rests gently beneath piercing dark brown eyes. Her hair is neatly tightly pulled back, crowned in the glistening of African-American beauty. She sits opposite and listens attentively as purposes for the discussion are explained.

Anika is a twelfth grader, enrolled in typical twelfth grade subjects, trigonometry, English 4A, Word Processing, Algebra 2, Choir, Physics, and the required Gym. She works after school in a day-care center. She takes voice lessons and sings in school and church choirs. She hesitates at the concept of tape recording the conversation, nervously wanting to be polite, but uncomfortable. Without hesitation, the tape recorder disappears and she looks straightforward with a painful and sorrow stare.

Question: *What is on your mind?*

Answer: *Getting into college -- getting a better education.*
Want to go to Tuskegee or North Carolina A&T.

Question: *How do you manage your life.*

Answer: *Step by Step.*

Anika tells about her faith in God, her beliefs about accepting people, about her hope. When about her future plans and how she was going to do in college, Anika lifts her hand, points towards her chest, and says, "Deep within there is a voice that has always been there. That voice tells me I can do anything that I put my mind to, anything." She speaks about the support or her mother who did not go to college, but influences her, making certain that she learned all that she needed to know and prompted her to take risks.

Anika had four friends killed in one weekend recently. In a separate incident, her neighbor was shot two times in the head and three times in the chest. He was wearing the wrong clothes in the wrong neighborhood. He was the victim of territorial staking. He wasn't a member of a gang. Anika has had eight friends killed since May. This is January.

Anika handles the trauma by keeping faith, keeping her head together and believing in God. Anika, with tears flowing, recites a song, "Through the Storm."

The storms of life will blow;
They're sure to come and go
They may meet me at a time
When I'm calm and doing fine.

But the captain of my soul
He's always on board
He rocks me in his arms
While riding through the storm.

I have no fear of the raging seas
Knowing Jesus is there for me.
He can speak to the wind and the waves
And make them behave.

Anika cries freely with the pain of mourning her lost friends.

Anika is typical of students that populate urban schools where violence has emerged forcefully. She does not comprehend the violence or anger in the streets and schools. She believes in the world as scripted in fairness, equal opportunity, individualism, and hope. She does not understand or comprehend discrepant values. She turns inward and towards her faith.

Background of the Study

In order better to understand the lives of students, I undertook a qualitative research study of teenagers who live and attend high schools in an urban school district in northeastern United States. In the early stages of study in the Summer of 1992, my initial interest was in school and student culture, student expectations, school curriculum (both formal and "hidden"), achievement, attendance, and drop-out rates. The over-riding question I posed was "Are minority youth well served by the public schools?"

However, as the study progressed, it became clear to me that the dominant theme pervading the lives of students was "**survival**" - - in the streets, in the homes, to and from schools, and in the schools. Their "cry," confirmed by teachers, site-level administrators, and security officers, transcended curriculum changes, site-based management, community alliances, and so on. From the perspective of students, the major issue facing them was surviving, first in communities and now in the schools where violence or the threats of violence were commonplace. Hence, I turned my attention to attempting to understand what their lives are like when surrounded by violence.

Methods and Data Sources

As an initial step, I visited high schools within a single urban school district of 45,000 students in the northeastern section of the United States. For one month, I observed, interviewed, and collected field notes. Following the month of initial visits, I collected primary data at two high school sites. Primary data collection entailed observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews with students, administrators, teachers, security officers, health care professionals, and police officers. Observations of students and staff in classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, school grounds, and neighborhoods also occurred. Secondary data collection included contemporary records, confidential student journals, public reports, student poetry and songs, student newspapers, school district public reports, crime reports, and census data.

The data that I present in this paper are limited to student descriptions of increased violence and are from a larger study. To access students as participants requires not only the permission of the immediate schools and the central administration, but also of parents and children themselves. I contacted designated key personnel, such as counselors and vice principals, and gave them a matrix for participant selection. The matrix included grade level, academic placement, age, and school visibility (low, medium, high). I depended on the personnel of each school to ensure an appropriate representation of teenagers.

Description of Washington and Prospect High Schools

To reach Washington High School from the school district central administration office, one drives down Connecticut Avenue, past expansive homes with well-manicured lawns, past private academies, art museums, and public parks. Streets are busy with cars; pedestrians are hurriedly walking towards offices, banks, churches, and restaurants. Children play in the parks. At the corner of Connecticut and Stanton, a left is taken towards an underpass,

past two stop lights, and, then, left on Franklin Avenue. The neighborhood has changed.

A Kentucky Fried Chicken place with bulletproof glass is on the corner of Franklin Avenue and Second Street. Orders are placed through a small "Lazy Susan" window, limited to exchange of food and money only. Conversation is through a microphone. The ambiance of the fast-food restaurant is security. Once orders have swiveled through the small window, money swivels back.

Down the street, a New Bound subway sandwich can be purchased for $.79; a Dairy Queen sits off the street. Next to the Dairy Queen, the First Step Clothing is barred. "Relocation Sale" under way. The barbershop is filled with people. The office for the Black Contractors Association is on the corner of Franklin and Fourth Streets. The Coliseum for Citizen's Renewal Center is on the right of the contractor's association. Jeremy's Classic Italian Food is on left, accompanied by Woodside Open Pit Barbecue and Dorsey's Record Shop. The office of Sickle Cell Society is on the corner.

Looming beyond Franklin Avenue, the top story of Washington High School rises above neighborhood rooftops. Nestled among two-storied and porched houses cramped together on narrow streets, the marble and concreted high school's grounds are fenced, chained, and protected. Unless security guards unchain the south gate to access a small rear parking lot, all cars (and there are only a few) must curb park around the front of the school. A few maple trees line the grass inside a cyclone fence that secures the school's boundaries. The only legal entrance to the school is up eight marble steps through four expansive doors posted with, "All Visitors Must Report to the Office."

To travel from Washington High School to Prospect High School, one drives back through the neighborhood to Franklin Avenue and south on Connecticut Avenue. Something is missing. Children are not outside playing; no one is pushing a baby carriage down the sidewalks; no one is walking or jogging the streets. People stand at bus stops and look nervously down the street for the arrival of buses. Occasionally, residents are seen; some peeking through front

windows; others standing or sitting near open doorways. Oftentimes a chair is placed near a curb to hold the space open from parking. No banks, no corporate offices, no businesses which offer employment other than than minimum wage jobs.

Near Highland Avenue, the Eastside Presbyterian Church advertises after school tutorial programs and a day-care center. The Zone #3 Police Station sits a block from the intersection of Highland and Broadway; a MacDonald's Restaurant is across the street. On the corner of Highland and Sycamore, the big Sears store is announcing its closure with broad banners in windows advertising "Final Clearance Sales." A Pizza Hut is right past Sears. Two blocks north of the Pizza Hut and Sears is Prospect High School, home of the Highlanders.

The recently renovated Prospect High School is two storied, red-bricked with four red double doors at the top of a broad five step entry. A parking lot for staff and visitors sits to the left of the main entrance. On the south wall, grey marbled columns encased in red bricks stand as a reminder of an original columned entrance long since gone. It appears as an architectural oxymoron -- a past history with the dreams of a future. No windows. Across the street from the high school is a private seminary with well manicured lawns, white gates, and white fences.

When entering both Washington and Prospect High Schools, one notes the similarity of the buildings although Prospect looks newer than Washington High School. In each building, security officers meet visitors for sign-in and distribution of security passes. Security guards sit, stand, and walk the corridors. "Hall Sweeps" occur in between the seven periods of classes to make certain all students are in their classrooms. Administrative offices are within twenty feet of the main security check points. Voices of security officers and administrators are heard over hand-held walkie talkies, taking control of communication in hallways and offices.

The few students who are in the hallways carry passes, some made to look like wooden keys. The schools feel orderly; everyone is busy at tasks. Voices of

teachers are heard flowing from classrooms into hallways. Students are in desks, some reading; some writing; some whispering; some sleeping.

Posters on walls depict current issues, such as "Silence the Violence: Increase the Peace," emblazoned over two football players or "I Have a Dream" inscribed above two connecting hands, one black and one white, with "Peace in 1993" inscribed below. Other posters announce themes such as, "If you're running a race against life, those who finish first, lose," "Miss School; Miss Out," "Five Step Process to Job Security," and a variety of college recruitment announcements. Missing from the walls are posters suggesting other themes of high school life, such as advertisements of after school or weekend activities at the school. There is a feeling of being down to business. However, a feeling of peace and safety is interrupted by the poster pleas for decreasing violence coupled with an edginess in voices that boom over walkie-talkies.

Statistical data provided by the school administration gives additional information about Prospect High School and Washington High School. Prospect High School has a student membership categorized by race of 66.4 percent African American, and Washington High School has a student population that is 99.1 percent African American. Both schools house academic magnet schools. Sixty-two percent of the student bodies are college bound.-- an anomaly. The two schools annually award over $415,000 in college athletic scholarships. However, achievement scores are low, mobility rates above 60%, student failure rate high.

Description of the Student Participants

Anika, Staci, Jeffrey and Kenny are four of the thirteen teenagers who provided primary data for the study. Anika and Kenny attend Washington High School; Staci and Jeffrey attend Prospect High School. Each is enrolled in seven classes a day. Whereas Anika wants to go to college to major in psychology, Staci wants to be a nurse; Colin is unsure; and Kenny wants to be a police officer. Anika, Staci, and Jeffrey live with their mothers; Kenny lives with his foster mother. None of the four are gang members or criminals; however, Jeffrey is a

member of a social gang that is organized for protection. Both Kenny and Jeffrey carry some sort of weapon for protection, usually a knife, when they are not in school.

It must be noted that the four teenagers were living in neighborhoods and attending schools where a marked increase in violence had occurred in the previous six months. For example, police records indicate that three times the number of armed assaults occurred during six months of the study than had occurred one year previously. Forty-five convenience store robberies occurred in the neighborhoods over the past year. In one school, eight classmates were killed between May, 1992 and January, 1993. Accordingly, the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants in the study is necessary; however, the actual interviews and meetings with the investigator were to some extent concealed and protected to ensure the safety of people involved in the study. The violence described by students was described also by teachers, administrators, security guards, and parents which I report in another study. Pseudonyms have been used in all cases and the location of the schools has been disguised.

Anika's Story

Anika is a senior at Washington High School where she has attended for four years. As a senior in the Advanced Studies Program, she takes a rigorous course load yet finds time for volunteering. She wears a gold medallion and gold nugget around her neck, gifts from her mother whom she admires.

Anika tells a story about the aftermath of three Washington High School students murdered over a weekend. She explained how the school flew the flag at half-mast; how Mr. M., the vice-principal understood the grieving and permitted people to miss class although they were in violation of the attendance policy. She told about the sense of loss; she told about the anger of students; she spoke about hope.

Anika joined with other Washington students who wanted to discuss the rise in violence, the impact of racism, and the discomfort they felt in adapting in a

white world. Teenagers like Anika feel the stares of strangers in shopping malls as African American teens come near. People hold their purses, look around for security, and watch the African American teenagers. She knows, as do others, that the color of one's skin stereotypically connotes violence. It is unsettling to her.

Anika also speaks about the impact of violent crime and gangs on African American women.

> Black woman is alone again. Her men are in jail, in a gang, or killed. Black women have been alone with her children for a long, long, time.

Anika shares ideas openly and candidly. She is the kind of teenager who connects with adults, causing them to question - - personal values as well as the values of society, such as, bigotry, racism, hatred, and the uncommon evil in the world. She is serene and grounded. She is hope.

Stacy's Story

Stacy wakes up each morning about 6:00 AM. She crawls out of bed about 6:15 AM. Her clothes are already laid out the night before. Listening to music, she does her hair, and leaves home about 7:00 AM. It takes her about ten minutes to walk to school. Upon arriving, she hangs out at her locker, waits for her friends, and talks before homeroom starts.

Stacy is enrolled in the upper academic track of courses. In English, she reads Mid-Summer Night's Dream and The Pearl. In World Cultures, she studies Ivan the Great, Hitler, Stalin and monarchies. In biology, she dissects frogs. Latin completes her 10th grade schedule. Stacy is anxious to talk. Staci says the schools were once safe.

Once upon a time, just two years ago, this school was not like this. It was just a typical high school. . . . It was fun, you know, you have a lotta friends . . . you're gettin' a feel for the school . . . you get all this freedom . . .and teacher's don't hollar at you.

This school . . . this school's different (now) in a lotta ways . . . there's people that they're close to you here, that you see gettin' hurt, that you see gettin' killed.

Worry about your friends goin home. Gotta worry about yourself goin home, you know . . . you feel safer in school than you do at home . . . walkin' home. It's a lot safer in here (student laughs) than it is out there (pause) . . . sometimes (afterthought). sometimes! Not all the time, but sometimes . . . . .

I mean, you know . . . but, you start watchin' the news, and then after you go to school, you see the things that can happen . . . the metal detectors, guns, and everything taken away from kids . . . We've had metal detectors in here numerous times . . . we've had police here . . . We've had tons of security. You just have to watch.

You know, I mean, there's a lotta good teachers and everything in here, but there's a lotta bad students and those two don't mix. So this . . . this school stands out in a lotta ways. The violence in the area . . . which makes the school bad because the students in the area go here, the kids in the area go here, and they attract the violence in here . . . it's not really a safe place to be. . .

> At home, walkin' down the street out in the open, you're scared to death. You never know who's gonna drive down and shoot you. It's not funny anymore. . . you never go outside when it's dark, 'cause you never know if you're gonna come back in the door.

Stacy spends much of her time worrying and fretting about safety, hers and her friends, and tries to figure out how to operate in a system for safety. She fears that schools will be closed. As Stacy tried to explain,

> Eventually . . .they will just close this school . . . but I think they're trying to keep it open . . . because they want to give everybody a chance . . . everybody deserves at least one chance.

Jeffrey's Story

Jeffrey puts on a navy blue stocking cap for the interview. The cap has a sewn patch of a green marijuana plant. He pulls the cap down over his forehead. Jeffrey wears baggy blue-jeans and a large, white baggy sweat shirt.

He is in the middle academic track for course work. In addition to Algebra II, Chemistry, English, Spanish, and World Cultures, he is enrolled in Journalism and Writing. Jeffrey thinks there's a lot of gang-related violence in the schools.

> There's a lot of chasing in the school -- at lunch time and in the hallways . . . . Lots of people bring their guns to school . . . you have to . . . there's so many drive-by shootings.

To feel safe, Jeffrey formed with friends their own type of protective gang, the Kabesi Possi. The Kabesi Possi just gets involved in fist fights, hardly bringing anything to school. "Anything" refers to a nine millimeter baretta automatic

handgun. Jeffrey says that students conceal guns and knives in belts holding big baggy shorts covered with a large baggy t-shirts like the one he is wearing. Jeffrey explains that gun clips are concealed in pockets.

> Different from the real dumb egg-head who shot himself in the finger last week at Washington High School, gun clips with 15 bullets are in pockets. There's a hairpin trigger . . . you can blow more than just your hand off.

Jeffrey says that carrying a gun is like participating in a "cold war" in the neighborhood and school. He explains that just as the Cold War existed between the Russians and the United States, a "Cold War" mentality exists among teenagers. Instead of bartering for power and peace with the threat of nuclear weapons, the guns are barter for power in gaining resources, protecting property, and protecting oneself.

> There are fights all the time, but guns are not pulled out . . . if a guy pulls out a gun on me, I'll pull mine out . . . and whoever dies, dies.

> School is dangerous. If you know enough people, you're fine . . . A lot of real nice people. Some of the nice people are even in gangs. The gangs don't take away the niceness. One gang will do somethin' to another gang, and the gang is after them and then they come to school, and then there's times we tried to leave school, and the principal calls us back 'cause we couldn't leave school because the gangs were outside shootin'. Schools don't get along with each other.

The organization of gangs follow the feeder pattern of neighborhoods into high schools. High schools who are competitive athletically also mark the boundaries of gang territories.

Kenny's Story: Violence and the African-American Male

"When I leave these doors (the school), I have to be alert, looking o'r my shoulder . . . . every minute. I watch cars go by . . . and people stare . . . at me. I think they know me. At least I hope they do."

This is Kenny, a nineteen year old senior who performs on TV, wears a white and black leather jacket and has an African-American high topped crew cut. He looks out through stylish wire rimmed glasses, accented with a hue of blue. He says he's a Christian which sometimes causes problems. Each week he works about 30-35 hours, usually at night, for a security business. With the job comes a scanner, pager, and a knife that can be buckled to his belt. He "carries something, not at school, but outside -- for protection." He does his homework right after school.

In the neighborhood, he says that people watch the street constantly. Last week he heard a report over his scanner of a strange black man wearing a black and white leather jacket, carrying a pager, scanner, and a gun. Suddenly, he realized that he was being described on the scanner as possibly armed and dangerous. He knows that police have stereotypical attitudes towards African American males and he even fears for his safety when police are involved.

> Every black male is stopped if he looks the least bit suspicious
> . . .If you're black, a male, and wear a brown, long overcoat,
> you'll be stopped immediately by the cops, with or without cause
> . . . and . . . you can be killed . . . by . . .by the COPS.

Kenny, ran home, called the police to explain the confusion, and stopped any action that may have been taken towards him.

Kenny has friends who have been victims of crime. He says the neighborhoods are not good.

> My friend was just stuck up walkin' Franklin, the street out there. He just was stuck up the other night. They took his pants and his coat. I mean, this has been goin' on for awhile.

Kenny says that you've got to be alert all the time. He relates a series of confrontations with crime.

> I don't . . . I'm not afraid to walk the streets. It's . . . it's just that . . . when I do, I have to be alert, you know, the whole time I can't just walk . . . . haven't . . . have a good time walkin' or talkin' to my friends. I just gotta walk . . . I walk . . . downtown . . . I've been stopped a few time . . . they wanted this coat . . . my watch . . . my money. It's like you can't walk with good things on . . . he'll shoot me if I don't give it to him. I didn't give it to him, I just said . . . and walked away. You have to know that these things are going to happen to you.

Kenny knows the dangers of wearing the wrong colors. If you're wearing red, you'd better be in Bloods territory. If you are wearing blue, you better be in Cripts territory. His mother gave him the map of areas showing which neighborhoods belongs to which gangs.

Kenny says that innocent people like himself are caught in the crossfire.

> Uh, the kid got jumped. Just walked up. I don't know what the reason was. They didn't do nothing. Innocent. I mean he wasn't into drugs, and not, nothin, nothin' and uh the cops that that most of victims are innocent people . . . .

Let it all go.

I mean, you know . . . it's life. Life everywhere you go you'll have somethin' like this. I just don't worry about it . . . I mean . . .

I'm ok.

Kenny accepts the realities of surviving violence on the streets. He thinks that people just need to figure things out. He mentally copes by rationalizing that violence is everywhere and the rest of the world is like this. He says he's okay.

Response to the Murder of TJ

Whether the violence itself remains in the neighborhood or whether it comes into the school or not, violence effects everyone. When a popular player on the football team was killed recently by a member of a rival gang, it impacted the school community - - its students, teachers, principals, and parents. Ironically, the star player was killed the day before Martin Luther King Day and the announcement of the death to the student body was made after an intercom address about peace and justice. Intervention specialists were available to students and in some classes, they did nothing but talk about violence. Following TJ's death, the principal sent a letter home that explained steps the school had taken to help students "work through their grief, anxiety, and anger." Furthermore, the principal explained to parents in the letter that two students were accosted the day following the killing by two outsiders who ran from the building. He assured the parents that "every effort is made to ensure that all of our students can attend school safely . . . No rumor or potential problems is taken lightly. . . ." And, that "much of what occurs in the schools is a reflection of what is going on in the communities which we serve."

Shortly after the killing of the young football player, students reacted by having t-shirts printed stating "RIP TJ," *Rest in Peace TJ.* However, when someone scratched "RIP TJ" on a wall in the stairwell, other students reacted by

scribbling "Fuck TJ and Fuck Plainfield," (Plainfield is the adjoining neighborhood) leading to a continued spiral of anger and offenses in and among the various neighborhood factions.

In addition to the conflicts that erupted within and outside the school campus, students responded by speaking out through their school newspaper. Jeffrey wrote the following article for the school newspaper.

Prospect, as everyone knows or should know by now, has recently found itself to be in the middle of gang tensions and disputes. I do not support gangs, in fact, I am opposed to them. I refuse, however to say anything to outright condemn people that choose to belong to gangs because, simply put, I know some gang members and they do have their reasons, even if these reason are not the best.

Why are these street gangs here, and how do we get them off the street are the main questions asked by not only the school's administration, but the city as well.

Why gangs are formed is a question that has been asked and debated by many people throughout history. Gangs are not a new problem, nor are gangs that where colors as identification of membership. In the sixth century (A.D. 500-599) Babylon there were two gangs called the "Blues" and the "Greens," that rioted often and tore the city apart.

I do not think that rich men in business suits that work for the government can tell us kids that we form gangs to have a sense of belonging. It might be the subconscious, but it is unlikely that it is a primary reason. Most of the time it is for protection from an old rivalry between different neighborhoods, just a sense of pride in where a group of people live, or for helping get needed money.

If one group of people in a neighborhood grow up together and hang out together, they just form a natural bond. Then, if either one or any member of this group has a problem with people from somewhere else, the whole group helps out.

How does the city get rid of the problem of gangs? Like I said, I am thoroughly opposed to gang activities, but getting rid of this problem takes getting rid of many other problems as well.

At risk of sounding like I am defending gangs and their members, I will say that the inner-city breeds problems that lead to gangs. Poverty, unemployment, drug sale and usage, and the availability of other things such as guns and alcohol, all along with an extreme feeling of hopelessness (it has been often noted that there is with a gun shop or liquor store on every corner in most ghettos in large cities) must be dealt with first because they are the ultimate cause. Once these have been taken care of, the effects will all but eliminate themselves.

Discussion and Conclusion

Anika, Staci, Jeffrey, and Kenny are encased in scenarios of surviving. Anika mourns the loss of her murdered friends, cries silently, and rides the storms of life's battles through her faith. She is grounded in family and faith and seeks to move on, making sense by listening to the voice within herself that tells her she can do anything.

Staci is panicked. She hears about violence on the radio; she sees the metal detectors in the school; she hears about guns in schools; she tries to make sense of it all. She knows there is a connection between the problems in the neighborhood and the problems in the school. The disparity between the once safe school and the now unsafe school caves in her pathways to feeling safe some of the time. She runs from home to school to home in constant fear of violence.

Kenny knows he is a target -- black, young, African American male. If not by his peer group, then by adults, such as police, violence can erase him. He knows that black males are stereotyped. He knows he needs to be known by whomever is driving by or he could have problems. He uses the equipment from his security job as an added sense of protection, the scanner, the pager - - he adds

a knife. He thinks that it's like this everywhere. He just has to learn how to survive.

Jeffrey has figured out the system. He knows that having a sense of protection can be provided through gang-like structures. He knows how intimidation with firearms works. He knows the art of negotiation through violence. He also has a profound sense of the infrastructure of community that contributes to the diminishing social structures within inner city neighborhoods and schools. He's also realistic. He knows that people outside the neighborhood do not know the conditions under which teenagers survive. In the provocative newspaper article, he sheds light on critical issues often left to sociologists and criminologist to untwine.

And, TJ, the obvious victim, symbolizes the swiftness through which dreams of college and athletics can be destroyed. Not only was TJ destroyed by a violent gang bullet, but teachers, administrators, parents, coaches, and students also were shot into the reality of the pervasive growth of violence and the sobering impact to lives. All were victims.

What's the possibilities for these children? How can we expect teenagers to get out of these conditions, to go to college, and to lead productive lives. If these four teenagers are among the strongest academically, what is is like for students at the bottom of the academic tracks?

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